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## Are the Homeless Taboo? – A Theoretical Perspective

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*Discussing works by Patrick Declerck, Ghassan Hage, and Giorgio Agamben, this paper asks whether society sets the homeless apart and treats them the way it does not by accident, but deliberately, because they serve, as outcasts, a particular function. This article does not attempt to analyse a given local or national situation; it is, instead, a thought experiment which develops a hypothesis by drawing on ideas put forward by authors such as Michel Foucault, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Achille Mbembe. It posits that the homeless are the result of an unacknowledged yet structural discriminating process whereby society deprives some people from their humanity in order to define itself, its members and its values.*

This paper begins with a naïve question: why does society seem to ignore homeless people? This question, however simple, is not easy to answer, as it is related to many other ones. Could it be that society does not really want to help the homeless? Can this be interpreted as evidence that they are taboo? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “taboo” means “set apart for or consecrated to a special use or purpose” and can be “said of persons under a perpetual or temporary prohibition from certain actions, from food, or from contact with others.” Could it be that the homeless are outcasts who assume, as such, a role in society? Is their situation a necessary consequence of the way in which society functions, and are they taboo because, if they were not, this functioning would be disrupted or jeopardised? In order to attempt answering such questions, this article will discuss the ways contemporary capitalist societies see the homeless and behave towards them. In doing so, it will also attempt to shed some light on society’s inner workings and values, but the reader should bear in mind that this article is written from a purely theoretical perspective. That is to say, sweeping generalisations and abstract suggestions will be made about the homeless and society, but these are deliberate. Indeed, the aim of this paper is not to provide data, facts, and concrete examples, nor does it try to disclose ‘the truth’ about the relationships between the homeless and society. Rather, its purpose is to provoke thought, and to invite readers to decide whether—or to what extent—this theoretical perspective applies to the homeless and to the society with which they are most familiar. This does not mean, however, that this paper is univocal: it will draw on Patrick Declerck’s article “On the Necessary Suffering of the Homeless,” and on texts by Giorgio Agamben and Ghassan Hage. In order to fuel this discussion, attention will also be drawn to works by Michel Foucault, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Achille Mbembe, whose insights on the ways societies function will prove helpful when attempting to answer the question: are the homeless taboo?

Patrick Declerck, who has studied homelessness over many years, provides a useful starting point for this exploration. Indeed, he asks a question similar to the very first one above: “homeless people are by and large harassed, abandoned, and condemned to horrific suffering. How do we allow this to happen?” (162-3). His answer to this question is straightforward:

Because we hate them. We hate them because they refuse to work and because they seem to mock everything we hold dear: hope, self-betterment, personal relationships, procreation, bringing up children, and even simply getting up in the morning. They are dirty, smelly, incontinent, and unsociable, and as such they are a living insult to our aspirations and narcissism. (163)

The homeless Declerck describes can be considered taboo in that the rest of society is said to behave towards them as if they had crossed an unspoken threshold, setting them apart and prohibiting them from functioning and interacting in the ways in which the rest of society does. Homeless people are not universally “dirty, smelly, incontinent, and unsociable,” but Declerck’s argument is that, if or when they are perceived as such, they constitute a useful counter-example for society. Their suffering is a “necessary” form of punishment, as the title of his article suggests. Insofar as they represent social failure, the homeless function as reminders of what society’s constituents should not do unless they wish to be condemned to suffer in a similar way. One of the salient characteristics emerging from Declerck’s depiction of the homeless is, for instance, that they are perceived as lazy. If refusing both work “and even simply getting up in the morning” is one of the key reasons why homeless people are hated by society, then the opposite of laziness, namely, being active and working, is what society values and rewards. The fact that the saying ‘the early bird gets the worm’ is so commonly used illustrates what Declerck points towards. What he makes clear, however, is that homeless people are not only *poor*, but that they are also *hated* for not being early birds. That is to say, the worm that homeless people fail to get from society is not only material wealth—which is what tends to be most commonly associated with that saying—but also recognition and consideration, as Declerck argues, on the grounds that they are lazy.

“Recognition” and “consideration” are also terms Pierre Bourdieu uses in order to explain that what society “dispenses” can be called *being*. Ghassan Hage usefully explains this in *Against Paranoid Nationalism*:

At the heart of Bourdieu’s anthropology is the idea that people are not passive recipients of being; they struggle to accumulate it. [...] it is society that offers individuals the possibility of making something meaningful of their lives. [...] It does so by offering people the opportunities to ‘make a life for themselves,’ to invest and occupy and thus create and give social significance to their selves. (16)

One could thus argue that, from the point of view of society, the homeless have not “accumulated” any being, that they have failed to achieve social meaningfulness through an active “making” and a “struggle” for being. The consequence of this is suffering a kind of “social death,” as Hage writes quoting Bourdieu: “there is no worse dispossession, no worse privation, perhaps, than that of the losers in the symbolic struggle for recognition, for access to a socially recognized social being, in a word, to humanity.’ [...] a situation where the possibilities of life are nil is akin to social death” (17). Once again, these ideas can be applied to the homeless, particularly the notion that “social being, in a word, humanity,” can be lost. The reason that the problem of homelessness is ignored—or not seriously tackled—might thus be that the homeless hardly exist at all in the eyes of society, precisely because they

have been deprived of humanity (or being) by a society that perceives them as not having earned or “accumulated” it.

Declerck’s article might leave its readers thinking of the homeless as left to struggle in a kind of limbo, in that they live in cities, but without being part of society. In other words, the homeless can be seen as living *on*—or rather, *off*—the city, on its surface, without ever living *in* it, and without much interaction with its inhabitants. What this means is that homeless people are left to live in ways that are often perceived as *animal*-like. What contributes to such an impression is the perception that the homeless live outdoors, struggle to find shelter, are often compelled to scavenge rubbish bins for food and, as Declerck explains, sometimes have no choice but to urinate and defecate outdoors and in public (166). In short, they are simply “desperately trying to survive hour by hour” (165). Thus, the homeless do not merely stand for, or represent, the opposite of what society values, they also *embody* it, since it is also in and through their suffering bodies that this opposition manifests itself. That the homeless should be left to have lives which are perceived as animal-like can be understood as the corporeal expression of the aforementioned deprivation of humanity or of social being. As such, the homeless appear, in society’s eyes, as living expressions of an unspoken threshold between man and animal—a concept developed by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In *Homo Sacer* (104-111), he argues that society is grounded on this threshold, which is the balancing point between the state of nature and the state of culture. It is thus worth asking whether the homeless embody the point at which the balance tips.

Agamben explains that society, the state of culture, is founded on the notion that there is an animal-like state of nature which human beings might fall back into. This is a fictitious state in which people would be killing each other as if they were wolves, as Hobbes famously argues in *The Leviathan*. In this account, society is made up of human beings who are citizens simply by the fact that they have delegated to a sovereign the power to decide who is *not* one of them. Because the sovereign is the only person who has this power, he allows society to get a glimpse, through his person, of the state of nature and chaos that would come about if all the citizens behaved like him (107). Indeed, the person banished by the sovereign ceases to be entitled to life and peace within society, is deprived of rights, and—like a wolf or any other animal—can be killed by anyone without this being considered an act of homicide (71). While Agamben does not use the word *taboo*, a term of Polynesian origin, he points out that this banished person was called *homo sacer* in Latin, meaning set apart, sacred, and that in Germanic and Scandinavian contexts, this person was often referred to as a sacred wolf or wolf-man (105). Agamben’s insights are useful in relation to homelessness insofar as through the figure of the homeless, society is perhaps also given a glimpse of the state of nature. Or, rather, society gets to see the animal-like conditions of survival and suffering that it would allegedly regress back into should its members not reject the temptation of laziness and refusal to work. As Declerck writes:

There is something seductive, vertiginous, dangerous about the thought of homelessness. If the lives of the homeless were made too comfortable, we worry that we might all be seduced into letting go [...]. Those moments of regression, when the alarm clock goes off and we turn it off with a lazy hand or put a pillow over our heads, might spread throughout our lives: we might turn our backs on reality. (169-70)

The homeless are therefore left to suffer in a state of survival because, according to Declerck, society believes that if the homeless were allowed more humane lives, then the idleness and laziness it sees in them might tempt people out of work and productivity. “It would be too threatening to our society if the homeless were allowed decent living conditions; we would rather they suffered,” Declerck writes (174). The homeless, like the state of nature in Agamben’s argument, are a political construct that enables society to define itself. Indeed, for Agamben, “the state of nature (...) is a principle internal to the City, which appears at the moment the City is considered *tanquam dissoluta*, ‘as if it were dissolved’” (105). It is what threatens all members of society should they not continuously renounce their power and give it to the sovereign. Similarly, the homeless can be viewed as *constructed* animal-like outcasts who are *deliberately* excluded, ignored and left to survive and suffer in order for society to be able to constantly define itself in opposition to them.

Moreover, if the homeless are deprived of being, dispossessed of humanity, and made to suffer animal-like lives, then the discriminating way in which society behaves towards them has characteristics in common with racism. The kind of racism here at play, to use Michel Foucault’s words in *Society Must Be Defended*, “is not bound up with mentalities, ideologies, or the lies of power” (258). In other words, what is at stake is a hidden, deeper and more structural racism, one tied to the ways in which society constitutes and defines itself, rather than a visible and easily identifiable form such as one that political parties might explicitly put forward on pseudo-scientific grounds. In order to explore this idea, alongside the question of whether the homeless have always played this kind of role for society (and whether they are condemned to do so), it is worth turning once more towards Hage. He develops the argument that “the circle of what each nation defined as its own version of civilised human society” (15) has evolved, expanded and shrunk back throughout history. Drawing on the work of the French “18<sup>th</sup> century observer and historian” Jules Michelet (14), Hage points out that before the French Revolution, “the lower classes were ‘racialised’ as innately inferior beings considered biologically ill-equipped to access human forms of ‘civilisation’” (14). After the Revolution and “throughout the nineteenth century,” however, an “important historical shift” occurred: “the increasing inclusion of nationally delineated peasants and lower classes into the circle of what each nation defined as its own version of civilised human society” (15). Although this historical shift seems to suggest that changes are possible and that the nation could take care of *all* its members, Hage points out the following: “this deracialisation and civilisation of the interior went hand in hand with the intensification of the colonial racialisation of the exterior. Now skin colour, in the form of European Whiteness, was emphasised, more than ever before, as the most important basis for one’s access to ‘dignity and hope’” (15). What Hage stresses is that if, from the Revolution onwards, “the ideal imaginary of the European nation-state [...] committed to distribute hope, to ‘foster life’ as Foucault has put it, within a *society* whose borders coincide with the borders of the nation itself” (15) was able to develop as a concept, it is only because the aforementioned “circle of what each nation defined as its own version of civilised human society” was made to coincide with nationality and whiteness. That is to say, the despised figures on the threshold of the animal and the human were no longer the peasants and lower classes but became the native people of colonised territories.

Achille Mbembe writes about this in “Necropolitics.” Quoting Hanna Arendt, he explains that “the savages are, as it were, ‘natural’ human beings who lack the specifically human character, the specifically human reality, ‘so that when European man massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder’” (24). This idea of killing without committing murder finds an echo in Agamben’s concepts of the wolf-man and the thought that animalising or depriving people from humanity serves a social purpose. Hage argues that nowadays, the circle of civilised human society no longer coincides with any nation and that “what we are witnessing is not just a decrease in the state’s commitment to an ethical society but a decrease in its commitment to a national society *tout court*” (18). He then suggests:

We seem to be reverting to the neo-feudal times analysed by Norbert Elias, where the boundaries of civilisation, dignity and hope no longer coincide with the boundaries of the nation, but with the boundaries of upper-class society, the social spaces inhabited by an internationally delineated cosmopolitan class. Increasingly, each nation is developing its own ‘third world,’ inhabited by the rejects of global capitalism. (18)

Hage stresses that global capitalism is increasingly taking over nationalism and now constitutes the dominant ideological force delineating the circle of civilised human society. Although one could debate the extent to which this might be the case, Hage’s idea provides an additional hint as to why the homeless are left to suffer on the outskirts of society. In such light, the homeless constitute one of the key targets of a structural, social, discriminating mechanism which seems to automatically take place when a circle is drawn around civilised human society. Using Foucault’s arguments (258), this “mechanism” can be called “racism”—even if it is “far removed” from “ordinary,” or “ideological” racism—which is what Hage also suggests when, writing about Michelet, he writes that “the lower classes were ‘racialised’” (14). Employing this term in this context should not lead one to forget, however, that on top of this structural racism, the homeless can also suffer from discrimination due to skin colour or ethnicity—or what Foucault calls racism’s “traditional form of mutual contempt or hatred between races” (258). Nowadays, according to Hage (18), the discriminating circle delineating the “boundaries of civilization” is drawn, by global capitalism, around people who can enter and contribute to its economic network of production and consumption as developers and/or as consumers. “The homeless sleeping on the city’s benches” and “third world-looking (i.e. yucky-looking) migrants” (20) are outside this circle, which means that they are denied any social being. Hage writes about them: “Not so long ago, the state was committed, at least minimally [...] to maintain them as part of society. Now, the ideological and ethical space for perceiving the poor as a social/human problem has shrunk. In the dominant modes of representation the poor become primarily like pimples, an ‘aesthetic nuisance’” (20). Emphasising the dehumanising process at stake, Hage argues that the poor and homeless are no longer a “social/human problem” but an “aesthetic” one; they are no longer people, but “pimples.”

Coming back to the question of whether the homeless are condemned to suffer, Hage’s analysis suggests that, were nationalism revived and were it to overtake global capitalism as the leading ideology determining the values and notions which shape society, welfare measures to help the homeless might arise. This would not, however, eradicate structural racism; it seems that the problem would merely be

displaced and that other individuals, most likely those from other nations, would likewise be rejected, perceived as animal-like, and made to endure lives of suffering, along the principles developed by Foucault and Agamben. Is it therefore possible, one might ask, to think of a way out of such logic, or is it inherent to the foundation of all societies? In *Race and History*, Claude Lévi-Strauss notes that

Humanity is confined to the borders of the tribe, the linguistic group, or even, in some instances, to the village, so that many so-called primitive peoples describe themselves as “the men” (or sometimes—though hardly more discreetly—as “the good”, “the excellent”, “the well-achieved”) thus implying that the other tribes, groups or villages have no part in the human virtues or even in human nature, but that their members are, at best, “bad”, “wicked”, “ground-monkeys”, or “lousy eggs”. (12)

Although such words are not encouraging, in that they suggest that all societies tend to draw a dehumanising circle around them, they point towards what might be the root of the problem of society’s attitude towards homelessness. Indeed, common to Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Mbembe, Hage and Agamben’s texts is the idea that societies set up discriminating dichotomies. In each case, they discriminate between, on the one hand, the members within the circle of civilised society and, on the other hand, those that lie beyond, which include those banished or excluded from the circle. Moreover this discrimination always seems to go together with the distinction between animal and human: the people within the circle are considered human, those on the outskirts are not. As Lévi-Strauss writes, “anything which does not conform to the standard of the society in which the individual lives is denied the name of culture and relegated to the realm of nature” (11). Whether those “standards” are dictated by nationalism, class, custom, religion or global capitalism, the process always seems to be the same.

The fundamental problem therefore appears to be the constant relegation of people beyond the circle of civilised society, or rather, the circle itself. Delineating that circle necessarily draws a line defining those inside in opposition to those outside. “In our culture,” Agamben argues in *Open: Man and Animal*, “man has always been the result of a simultaneous division and articulation of the animal and the human” (92). That is to say, human identity has been forged in relation and in opposition to the animal, as if humanity was something that had to be constantly assessed, compared to or wrought out of animality. Agamben even suggests that “perhaps concentration and extermination camps are also an experiment of this sort, an extreme and monstrous attempt to decide between the human and the inhuman, which has ended up dragging the very possibility of the distinction to its ruin” (22). This constant attempt to compare and contrast the human and the animal in order to define the limits of the former—a tendency Agamben calls the “anthropological machine”—has had such dire consequences that the best thing to do, according to him, is to try to stop this machine by simply suspending the two terms (92). That is to say, ceasing to constantly question and test the limits and alleged borders between animal and man might be the best way to stop society from both creating and ignoring intermediary figures—i.e. people it sees on the threshold of humanity and animality, such as the homeless. For instance, Declerck writes that starting to treat the homeless with decency “means, in effect, rethinking the boundaries of the social contract” (174-5). The use of the term “boundaries” points towards Agamben’s proposed remedy of a “suspension,” in other words, the idea that there should be no passable

and debatable boundaries, lest threshold figures—people on the fringes of, or excluded from, society—be perpetually created. What “must be defended,” to use terms from the title of Foucault’s article, is therefore not what lies within the circle of society—not culture as opposed to nature, not civilization as opposed to barbarity. Rather, it is humanity as such, which should never be thought of as having a border with the animal realm. Instead, as Agamben argues, humanity ought to be considered as being forever separated from animality by an unfathomable and unpassable void (92). This would entail getting rid of, on the one hand, the fictions of an alleged and threatening state of nature with animal-like human beings while affirming, on the other hand, the unquestionable universality of one and only humanity. Doing so—granting social being, recognition and consideration to everyone—goes hand in hand with preventing society from creating boundaries that invariably lead to threshold figures, animalisation, dehumanisation and exclusion.

Starting from the search for an answer in an article by Patrick Declerck, to a question about why homeless people seem to be ignored and abandoned by society, this investigation has considered how the figure of the homeless can shed light on society as a whole. The homeless, as this article hopes to have shown, can profitably be seen as taboo, that is to say, as playing an unacknowledged role in defining society, its values and borders through the presentation of a negative. As figures denied social being and condemned to live, animal-like, on the outskirts of society, and as figures on the threshold of culture and nature, the homeless appear as one of the targets of the structural racism that inevitably seems to occur whenever a society defines the borders of its humanity or state of culture. What ultimately surfaces is that, in order to counter this structural discrimination along the lines of a division between man and animal, the notion of belonging to humanity should be unquestionably granted to everyone and constantly defended, especially since, as Lévi-Strauss writes about “the concept of humanity as covering all forms of the human species, irrespective of race or civilization (...) there is no certainty—as recent history proves—that it is safe from the dangers of misunderstanding or retrogression” (12).



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Adam B. Clay is a doctoral researcher and tutor at the University of Edinburgh. Prior to being a PhD candidate in English Literature, Adam studied Philosophy and English and held language teaching positions in universities in France and in New Zealand. His research focuses on poetry and care, drawing on works by Martin Heidegger and Ralph Waldo Emerson.